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ABSTRACT

Ontario Rural Literacy is a special interest group of educators concerned with the particular needs of literacy programs in rural areas of Ontario. The group promotes awareness of literacy issues among the general public as well as providing support to member programs. The 12 members of the provincial steering committee represent all regions of Ontario. This report addresses issues specific to rural special projects funded during 1993-94. Rural communities and rural literacy programs have distinct geographic, economic, social, and employment characteristics that create barriers to teaching, learning, and program development. These barriers include isolation; increased expenses due to travel, long distance, and reduced numbers of clients; limited support services; negative connotation of "literacy"; limited relevant materials; and minimal research into the literacy programs of rural Ontario. Recommendations for addressing program barriers include: (1) rural representation on government policy-making committees; (2) development of a distinct costing mechanism for rural programs; (3) availability of funds and equipment for effective networking; (4) support for offering a wide spectrum of services; (5) development of relevant materials for rural adult learners; and (6) research concerning the needs of adult learners and barriers to participation in rural Ontario. (LP)

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Ontario Rural Literacy Special Interest Group

March 1994

Rural Literacy

ONTARIO

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Executive Summary

Rural literacy programs are different from their urban counterparts. Rural communities and rural literacy programs have distinct geographic, economic, social, and employment characteristics which create barriers to teaching, learning, and program and community development.

These barriers include isolation; increased expenses due to travel, long distance, and reduced numbers; limited supporting services; negative connotation of 'literacy'; limited relevant materials; and minimal research into the problems and literacy programs of rural Ontario.

These barriers need to be addressed through distinct policies and funding mechanisms for rural programs.

Summary of recommendations

1. **Rural representation is critical on government policy-making committees.**
2. **A distinct costing mechanism is essential for rural literacy programs.**
3. **Funds and equipment must be available for effective networking.**
4. **Rural literacy programs need support to offer a wide spectrum of services.**
5. **There needs to be support for the development of relevant materials for rural adult learners.**
6. **Research must be carried out on the needs of adult learners and barriers to participation in rural Ontario.**

Steering Committee Members

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Leah Morris, *chair*
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Distinct Needs of Rural Literacy Programs

Introduction

Ontario Rural Literacy is a special interest group of adult educators concerned with the particular needs of literacy program deliverers and learners in the rural areas of Ontario. We are interested in promoting awareness of literacy issues among the general public as well as providing support to our member programs. There are 12 members of the provincial steering committee representing all regions of Ontario and various sectors providing literacy programming (community-based, college, and school board).

Seventy-four programs are contacted for input on our yearly grant proposal, given information about conferences and workshops, and provided with display and promotional materials.

We have become increasingly aware of the distinct nature and special needs of rural literacy programs as we share information at our meetings and conferences. The Rural Special Projects which were funded by the Literacy Branch in 1993-94 further highlighted the distinctness of rural programs and the importance of making our needs and recommendations known.

The Problem

Rural literacy providers and learners have needs which are distinct from those of their urban counterparts. They require distinct approaches, funding mechanisms, and policies to help overcome the barriers to meeting these needs.

We are very concerned that the currently proposed education and training plan will not meet the needs of rural learners and communities.

The establishment of Local Training and Adjustment Boards (LTABs) concerns many literacy providers. Who will sit on the boards? Will they be knowledgeable and sensitive to the needs of rural literacy program providers and learners? Small-town politics, where a few individuals often play multiple roles, can skew representation. If labour, by definition a non-rural sector, is to have eight out of 20 seats, who will represent the rural voice? Business is also concentrated in urban areas.

In local board areas where there are one or two urban areas, there is a real danger that the urban areas will have the preponderance of seats and rural concerns will not be represented. The potential is for LTABs to become very urbanized.

Rural voices are already underrepresented in provincial decision-making meetings. Rural representation must be proportional to the rural population in any given local board.

This report draws on examples from the Rural Special Projects which were funded in 1993-94 by the Literacy Branch of the Ministry of Education and Training to support this thesis. Experiences of other rural literacy programs are also cited.

The Situation

A report entitled "Rural Literacy in Ontario," compiled in 1989 by Sandra da Costa, described the work of rural literacy providers who met through the Ontario Literacy Coalition beginning in 1987. This ad hoc committee recognized the need for a well-organized rural literacy network to advocate on behalf of rural literacy programs' special needs. The problems identified were:

- isolation
- lack of access to resources
- limited or no public transportation
- time needed to cover large distances
- cost of long distance calls
- adequate facilities
- outreach
- seasonal work
- lack of day care
- confidentiality.

The successor to this committee, the Ontario Rural Literacy Special Interest Group, fully agrees with this list of problems. This report categorizes the problems under the headings of distance, isolation, employment, and social character, and makes recommendations for policy development and funding mechanisms.

Distance

Geographic barriers are created by significant distances and the lack of public transportation. They result in higher operating costs and the potential isolation of learners and practitioners.

People looking at literacy from an urban perspective can find it difficult to comprehend the distances that some rural programs cover. Rural programs must do outreach and direct service at the same time; outreach can mean having to travel hundreds of kilometres to make people in several communities aware that you can provide direct service to them. For a learner without a car, it may mean no service. The Lambton Learning Lab has shown that a mobile bus is very helpful to people in rural areas.

The cost of distance accumulates in a range of forms, from long-distance phone charges and gas to significant travel time and logistical problems in linking tutors and learners.

A tutor from the North Channel Literacy Council who lives and works on Manitoulin Island tells about three learners in the Mindemoya area, clients of the Association for Community Living (ACL), who were being transported to Gore Bay for tutorials by ACL staff. ACL had been bearing the cost of a staff person's time and travel (about an hour and a half driving on rural roads per week).

When ACL suggested that they would not be able to provide transportation any longer, an alternative arrangement of setting up a small group for the learners in the Mindemoya area was made even thought the tutor didn't think the group would be as effective as the previous arrangement. In the end, ACL has continued providing transportation to individual tutors' homes, but the possibility of this service ending and a compromise arrangement being established is very real.

Isolation

Isolation affects both practitioners and learners. Networking for professional or personal development is more difficult in rural areas. Sharing resources, not to mention ideas and concerns, is also more cumbersome and costly to orchestrate. Group meetings for learners are difficult to organize.

Ann Slater of the Adult Literacy Program in St. Marys writes about the difficulty of organizing small groups: "I think small groups in rural areas do end up being whoever you can get. I find it is difficult to even find 3 or 4 people who are available at the same time and are interested in being in a small group. Being available at the same time also involves being able to get to a central location at the same time because there is no public transportation. People often have to schedule their learning time around when the family car is available."

Further to the problem of working in small groups, she adds, "I think it is often easier to work in small groups when there is some common interest or similar levels. This isn't possible in rural areas usually — to have a small group we have to be prepared for diversity in interest, in levels, etc. I think we also have to be prepared for small groups to be very small — 2, 3, or 4 people."

In her 1989 report, Sandra da Costa noted other consequences of isolation which affect learners. Isolation, she wrote, "can keep illiteracy a private, shameful thing," and "learners may not have experienced much social interaction and may feel intimidated by tutors coming into their homes."

Isolation also discourages the exchange of resources and weakens attempts to learn about and evaluate programs. The Huron Literacy Project of Centralia College closed down last year when funding for this program was cut off. Thirty trained volunteer tutors now are working without a resource base and there is no one keeping track of their work.

Employment

The workplace in rural areas often consists of one or a small number of employees. For this reason, unemployment can be hidden as there are no massive shutdowns to make the news. And, in an individually run business, one person must have many skills.

Rural along with urban employment has been requiring higher literacy levels. The 1993 law requiring farmers to pass an exam before being able to transport or use pesticides is a case in point.

Employment in rural areas is typically seasonal, whether the local economy is based on tourism, agriculture, or resource industries. Seasonal employment affects the availability and energy level of learners. It is difficult to find time for class hours during haying season or have regular classes when an adult has already put in a long day at a physically demanding job. Some learners are only able to attend literacy classes while unemployed.

Social character

Rural and small communities have a distinct character. First of all, by definition, they are small in terms of population. People tend to know one another and recognize newcomers as outsiders. It takes time to build trust and start programs. In a rural setting it usually takes three to five years to become known in the community.

The manager of North Frontenac Literacy Program developed a project called TREET (Towards Rural Education and Employment Training). They spent the first year establishing structures and links in the community to get local stakeholders involved.

Social characteristics of rural areas can be supports as well as barriers. Developing trust and establishing networks can take longer but also be longer-lasting. Personal contact lines may cross more often, creating a stronger network or, on the other hand, more competition. One-year pilot projects that raise the community's expectations can be disastrous when you face the same people again and again after the project ends. In fact, the very concept of a pilot project may be counter to the needs of rural residents. In urban and rural communities, a continuum of services is always the goal; however, in rural areas there are fewer programs to offer that continuum. If one literacy program, by default, provides a whole range of services, think of the consequences when all or part of that program is not funded again.

Another social barrier is the fear of losing one's anonymity. In some communities, there may be a stigma associated with the term "literacy," and even "upgrading" is not always viewed positively. "Coming out" to a literacy program in a small town is a risk. As long as there is such a stigma, there will be adults who will not want to be associated with a literacy program.

Literacy classes may be worked in with computer training, food and nutrition classes, pesticide training, or Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS) training. This takes extra time and money.

The manager of the Literacy Council of Lincoln focused more on employment services than literacy. In her area of the Niagara Peninsula, there is no public transportation and a 16 per cent unemployment rate. Since she felt that literacy would carry a negative connotation, they called what they were offering free one-on-one training rather than literacy.

The Lanark County Reading Network initially focused on developing health brochures and publications that were clearly written. The network also provided special interest workshops, realizing that lack of awareness of a program's existence was another barrier to success.

Community development in rural areas needs strong leadership. Literacy programs do not only prepare adults for the workforce. Literacy supports lifelong learning and personal and cultural development, which contribute to healthy individuals and strong communities.

The Barriers

There are many barriers to rural literacy programs which can be identified from the preceding descriptions.

Limited services

Because there are limited social, educational, and employment services, literacy providers tend to become "front- line workers" who must respond to a wide variety of needs. Sometimes a rural program has one staff person who does everything from coordinating outreach programs and making speeches, to performing secretarial duties, tutor training and delivering and producing materials, to helping learners get in touch with social agencies for extra personal help.

Rural programs do not have the luxury of specialization because of the lack of services in rural regions. Without the range of services that are often available in urban areas, it is necessary to have a very broad definition of literacy and to meet the needs of learners on several levels. For instance, there may not be an English as a Second Language program to refer a learner to or an employment counsellor available on a regular basis, if at all, in a rural community.

Limited accessibility of day care in rural areas makes it difficult for parents to attend literacy classes. In an article in *Rural Adult Education Forum*, Kathy Neill Keenan and Elisse Zack recommend parents bring their children with them. Tutors can help learners go through a book with their children or another person may read to the children while the parent is tutored.

Regional offices tend to operate on a limited basis and may actually be inaccessible to a rural resident who doesn't own a car. Some rural people may be hesitant to go to urban areas.

Funding issues

Rural programs cost more. Along with the obvious additional expense of travel and long-distance calls, there are hidden expenses. Outreach and promotion in rural areas take many forms: speaking engagements, posters, contacting all the library branches, to name a few. More research needs to be done on whether costing procedures developed for urban programs are appropriate to rural needs.

Funding mechanisms are often not sensitive to rural needs. In a rural setting "turf" often becomes a concern, as there can be a number of agencies asking the same people and companies for support.

As noted earlier, another problem is the short-term pilot project. There is a danger in introducing a pilot program that may raise expectations and not be able to continue. After winning the trust and confidence of a community, it can be hard to pull out and ever hope to start something again.

Materials

There is also a need for relevant educational materials for rural learners and providers. Reading about the problems of the urban poor or learning how to read a bus schedule are not relevant to rural residents. The coordinator of Small Group Literacy, Killaloe, set up two learning centres. The major difficulty she faced was the lack of suitable materials for rural adult learners. On the other hand, learning material specific to rural needs is in high demand, as evidenced by the popularity of the Pesticide Pre-Course funded by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA). Two hundred new workbooks are printed each week during the peak winter season at the Ridgetown OMAFRA office.

Political issues

The development of a new provincial education and training system is of great concern to rural literacy providers. To restate the problem identified earlier, it is critically important that the rural dimension be understood and addressed by government policy makers. Rural communities must not be overshadowed by urban centres in their local board areas.

Another political barrier shows up in the urban language of granting agencies. Applications for grants ask for numbers of students and time and money needed to establish and develop literacy programs without distinguishing between urban and rural programs. References to other area agencies providing literacy services also make an urban assumption that there are other literacy services in the area!

Research

A Report of the Northwest Action Agenda Project, "Barriers to Rural Adult Education," noted that "a lack of data on the needs of rural adults and barriers to their participation has limited program expansion." The same could be said for rural Ontario. Research conducted by the Northwest Action Agenda Project led to aggregate lists of barriers. Both learners and providers believed that "when compared with their urban counterparts, the rural adult does not have equal access to educational opportunities." It was concluded that further research was needed to identify successful programs and to extract key elements and test their feasibility financially and politically. Efforts to share this information and replicate programs were also needed.

Too often program successes in rural areas go without notice or documentation.

Recommendations

These recommendations follow from the identification of barriers to rural literacy programs:

1. Rural representation is critical on government policy making committees, including the Ontario Training and Adjustment Board (OTAB) and the Local Training and Adjustment Boards (LTABs) with significant rural areas.

2. A distinct costing mechanism is essential for rural literacy programs. This mechanism should take into account increased costs for phone, travel time and distance, reduced number of learners and additional time required to get programs running. One-year pilot projects are not sufficient in rural areas and projects should be funded for at least two years.

3. Funds and equipment must be available for effective networking. The Ontario Literacy Communications Network (CoSy), the federally and provincially funded computer telecommunication system for literacy workers in Ontario, has been invaluable; its continued use should be ensured through adequate funding of the system and access to computers.

4. Rural literacy programs need support to offer a wide spectrum of services. Literacy should not be too narrowly defined and funding should be able to go towards employment preparation and other services people require. Family literacy programs help reverse the cycle of intergenerational illiteracy while at the same time providing a partial solution to the need for childcare. Interministerial (including OTAB) coordination of efforts could help ensure that literacy program activities don't have to be restricted.

5. There needs to be support for the development of relevant materials for rural adult learners.

6. Research must be carried out on the needs of adult learners and barriers to participation in rural Ontario. Successful programs need to be documented and evaluated; key elements should be identified, applied to other rural programs, and then evaluated.

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Written by Andrea Leis with input from the Steering Committee Members of the Rural Literacy Special Interest Group with financial support from the Literacy Section of the Learning and Employment Preparation Branch of OTAB.

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